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ABSTRACT

Born in 1900, Jacques Prevert was destined to become one of the most popular poets of the twentieth century. After spending his young adulthood with artists linked with the surrealist movement, Prevert became a satirist, social critic, songwriter, writer of children's stories and television programs, and poet. Prevert's interests in the visual arts led him to produce collages and poem-commentaries in collaboration with photographers and artists. The writings of Jacques Prevert abound in economy, dynamism, and immediacy. The dominant oral character of his poetry is more like familiar conversation than formal dialogue, and questions, exclamations, and interjections are part of the poetic language. French culture abounds in Prevert's language, and his poetry asserts that the role of reason has been vastly exaggerated. The heroes of Prevert's poems are the sun, children, women, and wild animals, while their adversaries are priests, generals, guardian angels, and all oppressors. As one critic suggested, the genius of Prevert lies in the nonchalance of his art. (Forty-two footnotes are included; 18 references are attached.) (SG)

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"Jacques Prévert: 'Modernism' - Conception and Perception of His Contemporary Society Through His Poetry"

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Presented at European Studies Conference,
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Jacques Prévert: 'Modernism'--Conception and Perception
Of His Contemporary Society Through His Poetry"

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Prévert's Life

Jacques Prévert was born in the very pleasant western suburb of Paris, Neuilly-sur-Seine, at the very beginning of the twentieth century, 1900 on February 4, destined to become one of the most popular poets of his century. He was the second son of a middle class family of modest means but of abundant love, of a warm, light-hearted mother and of an easy, moderate father. Little Jacques and brother, Pierre, were reared in Catholic instruction. As a little boy Jacques often accompanied his father who visited the poor, as he was employed with the Office of the Poor of Paris, a charitable organization supported by the Church, to provide help for the needy. This spectacle of Paris was destined to be a source of images transposed into his film-scripts and poems and served as the source of his sympathy for the underprivileged.[1]

Too young for active military service when the First World War overtook Europe, Prévert started his employment in a department store as a shop assistant but soon moved from job to job; he could not sustain his jobs for very long. In 1920 he entered military service at Luneville, a period which was to be most influential in his life. He met a tall eccentric André Breton, the future chief of the Surrealist School, and Yves Tanguy, the future surrealist painter. Later in Constantinople in 1921 he met another life-time friend, Marcel Duhamel, a translator of English and American novels and later the chief editor of the famous Gallimard Série Noire collection. After their term in military service the three friends returned to Paris to earn their living in a variety of ways. The three shared a house in Montparnasse, living with their future wives until around 1927-28 when they separated to pursue their own interests: Prévert did a few walk-on parts in films, and Tanguy started drawing and painting. Pierre Prévert, now film-projectionist, offered them the great past-time of watching movies both day and night. It was during those years that the house on Rue du Château became the meeting-place for the surrealist poets and painters, Breton, Aragon, Peret, Desnos, Leiris, Queneau, Tanguy, etc.[2] At that time Prévert was not yet writing.

Early Productivity

In 1927 Prévert produced a documentary on the picturesque aspects of Paris; this marked the beginning of his involvement in film-script writing.[3] By 1930 he had succeeded in making himself into a satirist, and his works appeared in Bifur and in Commerce, two French publications, and in Transition, the Paris-based American magazine. His denouncement of the corruption and hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie and its threat to French society and his stand on social protest became even more pronounced with his compassion of the underdog after the world-wide crisis of the 1930s. From 1932 to 1936 he became a major

contributor to Le Groupe Octobre, a theater group named after the Russian Revolution of October, 1917, composed of a variety of talented and unpaid persons who tried to arouse public opinion against the spreading misery of the depression. Although not a Communist but a strong protagonist of an independent mind, Prévert wrote farces, pantomimes, and sketches, sentimental ballads and protest songs, satirizing French society. He often took a role himself in his own plays. Upon invitation in 1933 he traveled to Moscow where they presented his farcical play, La Bataille de Fontenoy (The Battle of Fontenoy) and other works.

During the following years the productivity and quality of Prévert increased. He soon met the composer, Joseph Kosma, who marked the beginning of a life-long collaboration of lyrics and unforgettable melodies. Prévert began to turn to a wide range of topics and feelings, expressing them with puns, lists and repetition of key-words, stylistic devices, etc. which characterize his unique style and his work.

By 1936-37 political issues became less pronounced and his commitment with Le Groupe Octobre came to an end. Film-making absorbed Prévert's dramatic talent, and he collaborated with the best French producers: Allégret, Renoir, Grémillon, Autant-Lara, Jacque, Delannoy and Cayatte, Carné, and his brother, Pierre. Les Visiteurs du Soir (Visitors in the Night) and Les Enfants du paradis (The Children of Paradise) their masterpiece, were produced in southern France during the war.[4]

Success

During the period of the Liberation, Prévert turned his talents to ballet and pantomime. Soon after the birth of his daughter, Michelle, he started writing children's stories and animated cartoons. In December, 1945, his first collection of poems, Paroles, appeared with immediate success. Famous singers such as Juliette Greco made his songs known on radio and through records. His works appeared, also, in cabaret-theatre. After recuperation in St.-Paul-de-Vence from a serious fall of the first floor of a sound studio in Paris, he continued working in cinema and radio; however, throughout the 1950s he also published collections of plays and poems many of which were written earlier.[5] His interests in the visual arts steadily increased, as he collaborated with photographers and famous artists to produce collages and poem-commentaries illustrated with etchings and lithographs, and then engaged in television writing with his brother.

Recognition

Prévert received recognition twice by having been awarded the Grand Prix du Cinéma of the society of Authors and Dramatists in 1967, the Grand Prix du Cinéma in 1973 for all his work, and the Grand Prix National du Cinéma in 1975.

Influences and Formation

At the time of Prévert's birth mass media were still in their infancy. André Prévert, his father, constantly exposed his son to the wonders of the cinema which accustomed Jacques to the various sights, sounds, and people of the Parisian streets. There Jacques sharpened his visual observation and

developed his ear for spoken language while cinematographic techniques trained his vision. Much later in life Prévert found film-making a natural art for making a living. In the '30s the cinema was not considered a suitable art form for "serious poets";[6] nevertheless, Prévert was the designed poet who was endowed with the gift and desire to make modern poetry relevant for a vast audience at the time that talkies were appearing, achieving "striking unity of vision in original compositions of personalities, images and words."[7]

Techniques

The same Prévert aspect appears in the visual and verbal organization of his works. His imagination and his theatrical talent develop the poem as situation, dialogue and characters in motion with the greatest concision of words. Prévert, himself, does not usually comment, as the images and situations develop naturally after "careful selection and montage."[8] His poems often start in the middle of the action or with a dialogue as in L'Orgue de Barbarie (The Barrel Organ):

1) "I play the piano
said one
I play the violin
said the other
I play the harp I the banjo
I the violoncello
I the biniou..I the flute
and I the handrattle," etc.[9]

Another example of a poem where the action has already begun is that of Le Cancre (The Dunce):

2) "He says no with his head
but he says yes with his heart
he says yes to the person he loves
he says no to the teacher," etc.[10]

In many poems he presents significant objects first; such as the poem, Events The Nightmare of the taxi driver:

3) "A taxi stops,
Human beings climb out
One of them pays the chauffeur,
The chauffeur goes off with his taxi," etc.[11]

Situation and object set the stage for the action in Promenade de Picasso (Picasso's Promenade):

4) "On a plate quite round of real porcelain
an apple lies
face to face with it
a painter in reality
vainly tries to paint
the apple as it is," etc.[12]

Prévert uses words that suggest location and introduces images and action with

their auditory connotation, in the poem of Complainte de Vincent (Vincent's Complaint) Prévert wrote:

5) "At Arles where the Rhone flows...
A man of phosphorous and of blood," etc.[13]

Cinematographic techniques and all types of film appear in Prévert's poems. In Déjeuner du matin (Breakfast Time) we have a silent film in slow motion, a juxtaposition of each frame in careful focus:

6) "He put the coffee
Into the cup
He put the milk
Into the cup of coffee
He put the sugar
Into the milky coffee," etc.[14]

In the poem, La Crosse en l'air (Cross in the Air) Prévert uses the technique of the newsreel:

7) "Be assured brave people
This is not a call to revolt
It is a bishop who is drunk and who puts his cross into the air
like that...while staggering
he is drunk
he has on his head this head-piece that they call a mitre
and all his clothing is richly embroidered
he is drunk
he rolls into the stream," etc.[15]

The poem L'Ecole des Beaux-Arts (School of Fine Arts) is inspired by cartoons; Prévert has the gift of putting magical effects into words; thus he creates sudden appearances and swift transformation, related also to the cinema. In a flash an object changes into another:

8) "From a box of woven straw
The father chooses a little ball of paper
And throws it
Into a bassin of water
It swells up
Many-colored
In front of the curious children
Into a big Japanese flower
Instant water-lily," etc.[16]

Prévert uses, also the 'jump cut' which compresses time and implies a relationship between what happens (not shown) and the person before and after the event. In Inventaire (Inventory) Prévert writes:

9) "one little boy going to school crying
one little boy going home again laughing," etc.[17]

Condensation of a love story into three verses by focusing on objects is the technique of the poem: 'Alicante:

10) "An orange on the table
Your robe on the rug
and you in my bed..." etc.[18]

In the Poem, Chanson des escargots (Song of the Snails), the poet utilizes swift change and "tracking." He uses "traveling shots" of the slow progress of the two snails going to the funeral of an autumn leaf (dead leaf) and a "close-up" of the characters, followed by another "traveling shot," then a "long shot" of the autumn landscape "fading out" into the sudden appearance of spring time:

11) "Two snails set out
For the burial service of a dead leaf...

And to show their grief
Wore black bands around their horns...

They set out on a black
Moonless night in autumn
But when they arrived
Alas! It was already spring"[19]

In the poem Paris at night the poet also uses the "zooming" and "fading" techniques. Darkness is briefly illuminated by the light of the three matches, then "face," "eyes," "mouth" are brought into visual focus, then they fade out into night, memory, and embrace:

12) "Three matches one by one lit in the night
The first one to see your face all around
The second one to see your eyes
The last one to see your mouth
And the darkness all around to recall it all
While squeezing you in my arms"[20]

Other techniques of "visual and verbal" interplay and that of "super-impositions" of images that dissolve and reappear in magical combinations are also employed by Prévert; however, this paper does not allow for identification of all those techniques.

Style and Vision

Prévert's vision tends to emphasize contrast like the contemporary technique of black and white film, as the vision is suitable for satire and caricature. His work abounds in economy, dynamism, and immediacy; moreover, his work is enhanced with his power of synchronizing words and images in rhythmical combinations of sounds. It remains a poetry of verbal wealth, and incorporates both the modern technological resources and that of the oral tradition of the past. Prévert's poetry is uniquely that of oral flavour, as he did embrace the ordinary language of the streets of Paris, the concerns of the average man, the basic happiness, and the sharp humor. At the same time this poetry is definitely destined to be read and be appreciated by the contemporary society of the twentieth century who leads a fast pace, who glances at things hurriedly and superficially, who takes little time to read long texts, and who concludes rapidly. His poems are composed of words read

or heard and quickly memorized, with puns and wisecracks to set off one's humour; they are often enchanting once set to music. Prévert never thought his poetry as "Literature" and satirized poems and poets in his C'est à Saint-Paul-de-Vence (At Saint-Paul-of-Vence) Memoires. In fact Prévert never chose initially a literary career, although his earlier satirical pamphlets did appear in recognized literary publications. Gaëtan Picon, a critic, wrote:

> "Formerly, the poet made his poetry with what others abandoned as non-poetic; he poeticized the universe. Today he makes poetry with what he knows to be non-poetic; he de-poetizes the poem. It is no longer a matter of annexing what is real to poetry, but of annexing poetry to what is real."[21]

Prévert always hated literary people posing, persons of the pen, and their intimate cliques, and never missed the opportunity of mocking intellectuals and critics. Likewise, he could express his ideas in a condensed form--epigram, aphorism, pun, and then unravel them in endless associations.

The oral character of his poetry is dominant. It takes the form of familiar conversation rather than of formal dialogues; the questions, exclamations and interjections of spoken French are part of the poetic language:

1) Questions:
"Where are you going my child...
with the flowers under the rain?" (Jour de fête, Holiday)[22]

"Who is there?
Nobody" (On Frappe, Someone's knocking)[23]

2) Interjections:
"Who would forget it?"[24] (Encore une fois sur le fleuve, Once again on the river)

Also in the poem, Search for a Child, Prévert begins a verse by saying, "Let's see."[25]

3) The natural tone is often reproduced, in anger: "Bandit, Hooligan! thief...Scoundrel!"[26]; and in appeal against punishment:

"Oh! Father!
Oh! Mother!
Oh! great uncle Sebastian!" (Holiday)[27]

A lyrical poem is composed by the simplest expressions of daily verbal exchanges as in Chanson:

"What day is this
We are every day
my friend..."[28]

Prévert favors structures and syntax, verb tenses, and commands often used in daily French. In the poem The Ticket Taker (Le Contrôleur) the poet uses:

"Let's go let's go
Let's hurry
Let's go let's go

Come on let's hurry...
Be polite
Don't push"[29]

He urgently appeals that Barbara, in the poem of the same name, not forget the happiness of the past:

"Remember Barbara...
It was raining endlessly over Brest that day...
Don't forget
A man under the porch was taking shelter...
And you threw yourself into his arms
Remember that Barbara
And don't begrudge me if I address you dearly"[30]

French culture abounds in the poet's language. He utilizes artistically songs, proverbs, idioms, clichés, nursery rhymes, prayers, slogans and quotations. His humour restores a distinct power to words which had somehow lost their original identity. He manipulates vowels, consonants, syllables with which he fabricates a new registry of meaning and significance. "A modern 'laughing philosopher,' he shows the defeat of language as it is used by rationalists and existentialists. By exposing clichés, Prévert seems to negate a civilization that is simply tired; on a more mundane level Prévert's use of clichés and his interest in the concrete objects and stereotyped people that they evoke are comparable to the use of advertisements and comic books in Pop Art.

His poetry, like Ionesco's plays, shows that the role of reason and will (as manifested by words) has been vastly exaggerated in regard to human motivation; that traditional belief in the omnicompetence of reason may even lead to deadly bondage. He cannot, however, be classified with the playwrights of the absurd, because of his Rousseau-like faith in those human spirits who have not been contaminated by a mechanized society."[31] In Paroles, Spectacle, and La pluie et le beau temps there springs simultaneously the lyric, the grotesque and the comic from a wild grouping of sound effects and verbal union. In the poetry of Jacques Prévert we enter into another world, as the pun takes on a broad dimension. His puns, his intentional spoonerisms and malapropisms are funny and deliberate; playing with words is also Prévert's means of seeing through social masks while seeking out attempts to suppress, conceal or to impress. In his poem Inventory (Inventaire) he elaborates methodically by a lengthy "inventory," thus alluding to the last phase of the Third Republic. Superficially the poem seems to be a humorous stock-taking; yet there is truly an enumeration of objects, people and animals, feelings and ideas all grouped together: Prévert manages to devaluate them and reevaluate them by his juxtaposition. He systematically devaluates things prized for their age: 1) antique furniture named after the Bourbon Kings of France, Louis XV, Louis XVI, and 2) one side-board in the style of Henri II, two side-boards in the style of Henri III, and three side-boards in the style of Henri IV. Prévert devalues by juxtaposition with non-existent styles created by the poet and reduces their assumed value to nil by adding next to them an "odd drawer," "a ball of string," "two safety-pins." 3) He further reduces their value and prestige by adding a dirty old man, one Winged-Victory , one accountant, three vegetarians, one cannibal, one American-style lobster and two English-style potatoes, thus deflating social pretentions. 4) He continues deflating by

adding time measurements: " one day of glory, one week of bounty, one month of August, one terrible year, one minute of silence, one second of inattention." Léon Gros sees this work, composed simply of a list of things, as an attempt to ridicule traditional poetry and at the same time as "denunciation of the absurdity of the world."[32]

Themes and Ideas

It is rather easy to discern the major themes of Prévert's poetry, as his topics listed in the table of contents and the emotions they arouse within the poems themselves are quite plain. Elliot G. Fay mentions in his article, "The Poetry of Jacques Prévert,"

> "Prévert reveals himself as an enemy of social and economic injustice. He hates war. He launches bitter attacks against religious insincerity. On the Positive side, he loves nature, city streets, people, animals, and birds. His love poems, though not romantic, are as moving as any that are being written today."[33]

The heroes of Prévert's poems are the sun, children, women, simple and natural people, and wild animals. Their adversaries are the priests, generals, intellectuals, guardian angels and all oppressors. Ridicule is his answer for his stance on anti-bourgeois, anti-Church, anti-militarists, anti-chauvinists, anti-academicians. His sympathy and praise are vividly expressed for the proletariat who have virtues of honesty, courage, and brotherly affection; he exalts free, unrestrained love between man and woman; he feels harmony and rapport between nature and the natural, primitive spirit of man; he extoles the senses and admires the enthusiastic imagination of the child. Certain vices are attributed to the bourgeoisie and certain virtues are characteristic of the proletariat. Militarists and politicians are the causes of war. The poet's training as a scenario writer influenced his poetry; consequently, character types or heroes and villians, good or bad guys are sharply drawn.

In his poem, An Endeavor to Describe a Dinner of Heads at Paris-France, there is a long elaboration of the middle-class sins of cruelty, indifference, or insensitivity to human suffering, and their concern for the immediate, the altruistic, rather than the social needs. Prévert terminates the poem with a listing of the sufferings. It must be made clear at this point that Prévert does not condemn the social strata of the bourgeosie or the lower class, but rather the injustices and "the wrong against which the whole poem protests."[34] In the poem, Morning for Sleeping (La Grasse Matinée) Prévert presents the case of a man who murders for a meal. Prévert tries to make the reader feel the torture and dizzy pangs of starvation that lead one to commit a crime. Prévert does not justify murder, but tries to bend our sympathy to the criminal, a victim of society.

Revolt is a theme that does not propose anarchy, but rather the interference of respected authority against the expression of man's natural, free spirit. He states in the poem, Le Temps des Noyaux (Time of the Nut-heads):

> "When you draw straws...
> When admirals fall into the sea
> Don't count on us to throw them a life preserver
> unless it's made of stone..."[35]

The poem La Crosse en l'air is a savage attack against the Catholic Church. It contains insults and obscenities of evident bitterness. While interviewing the Pope, a nightwatchman who is an atheist and a proletariat, takes his stand quite clearly and firmly:

"Hello hello Holy Father you hear me
atheist
A as in absolutely atheist
T as in totally atheist
H as in hermetically atheist
E short e as in extraordinarily atheist
IST as incorrigibly surely thoroughly atheist."[36]

Prévert's technique satirizes the sacred concepts of Christianity, by referring to them in daily jargon. He seems to tie together the greed of capitalists with the misery of the proletariat; moreover, he refuses to see anything in Catholicism but an instrument used to suffocate the free, natural spirit of man, his source of happiness.[37] Prévert emphasizes the trappings of Christianity not its metaphysics. The reader must realize that Prévert's hostility toward religion is based on a personal not a dialectical level.

The antipathy to war is illustrated in several poems; however, Familiale or Family Feeling is a poem where Prévert links war to the bourgeoisie:

"The mother knits
The son wages war
She finds this quite natural the mother
And the father what does the father do?.....

He business
He finds this quite natural the father..

The son is killed he goes on no more
The father and the mother go to the graveyard
They find that quite natural the father and mother
Life goes on with knitting war business
Business war knitting war
Business business business
Life with the graveyard"[38]

Prévert's view of this world is grouping together war, knitting, and business, as they indicate "natural pastimes" for human conventiality, knitting for domestic woman, and the direction of business for the middle-class man. Life is mechanical, and Prévert links these ideas in a repetitive rhyme scheme, monotonous and inflexible to convey a thin connection among the family ties, their daily chores, and the horrors of war. In several poems Prévert asserts that freedom is the principle that unites the human values of man; this is true particularly in the matter of love..."free" love in the sense that no restrictions ought to be imposed by either party involved in this relationship. In the poem Pour Toi Mon Amour (For You My Love) he chooses a lover who went to the market for birds, then to the market for flowers, then to the markets of chains and slaves. But he did not find his love there. Prévert believes firmly that one does not capture, possess, nor hold another human being by some force, lust, or power, but rather people bind themselves together voluntarily, fully, and spontaneously. Such is his conception of free love, natural and uncorrupted. Although Prévert extols the marvels of

nature, his favorite symbol is that of the bird because it symbolizes freedom, the "natural order." In the poem, Pour Faire le Portrain d'un Oiseau (To Make a Portrait of a Bird) Prévert writes:

"First paint a cage
with an opened door
then paint
something pretty
something simple
something beautiful
something useful...

Don't get discouraged...
Wait if you must for years...

When the bird arrives...
Observe the most complete silence...
then
erase all the bars one by one...
then paint the green leaves, the freshness of the wind
the sunbeams....
if it sings that's a good sign
Then...you write your name in the corner of the painting."[39]

There is an interesting interpretation. A critic, Arnaud Laster, suggests that the poem has a hidden sense. "The spirit of the artist must be opened to life, to beauty; he must have the patience to wait for the needed inspiration and seize it when perceived, express it with words or colors, then erase all trace of artistic effort needed to give his work the appearance of life. If the work lives, the success of the artist is attained, and he can now sign his name to his work."[40]

Conclusion

Prévert's reputation weighs on the acidity of his satire which is often brutal. The tradition of "revolt" culminating in Prévert is that of total revolt: "...political, intellectual, social revolt. Revolt against the "bourgeois parliamentary system, evident in the adherance of many youths to maurrassism or to communism...Revolt finally against traditional literary language, against which an ordered offensive is beginning."[41]

No one style accounts wholly for Prévert's reputation; Gaudin says simply that the genius of Prévert lies in the apparent nonchalance of his art.

"Thus Prévert's poetry is formed of very diverse elements: social satire, a horror of metaphysics, a love of life, a fantasy optimistic for the most part, black humor. Nevertheless, it is not in variety alone that the poet's originality abides, but also in the art by which, without appearing to bind himself to literary preoccupations, he (Prévert) knows how to translate sensations into words."[42]

FOOTNOTES

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7. ibid. p. 6. 8. ibid. p. 6.
9. Jacques Prévert, Paroles. Gallimard, Paris, 1949. p. 139.
10. ibid. p. 63. 11. ibid. p. 50-51. 12. ibid. p. 232.
13. ibid. p. 192. 14. ibid. p. 144. 15. ibid. p. 105.
16. ibid. p. 160. 17. ibid. p. 203. 18. ibid. p. 24.
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22. Jacques Prévert, Histoires. Gallimard, Paris, 1963. p. 72.
23. Jacques Prévert, Paroles. p. 84.
24. Jacques Prévert, Histoires. p. 27 25. ibid. p.72.
26. Jacques Prévert, Paroles. p. 84-85.
27. Jacques Prévert, Histoires. p. 73.
28. Jacques Prévert, Paroles. p. 177. 29. ibid. p. 216-217.
30. ibid. p. 199-200.
31. Anne Hyde Greet, Jacques Prévert's Word Games. Univ. of California Press, Berkeley, 1968. p. 81.
32. Léon-Gabriel Gros, Poètes contemporains. Cahiers du Sud, Paris, 1951. p. 200.
33. Eliot G. Fay, "The Poetry of Jacques Prévert," The Emory University Quarterly, II, 4. 1947. p. 232.
34. William E. Baker, Jacques Prévert. p. 37.
35. Jacques Prévert, Paroles. p. 72.
36. William E. Baker, Jacques Prévert. p. 47.
37. ibid. p. 49. 38. ibid. p. 54.
39. Jacques Prévert, Paroles. p. 151-152.
40. Pierre Barbéris, and Georges Jean, Textes Pour Aujourd'Hui, A Travers Prévert. Larousse, Paris, 1975. p. 79.
41. Pierre Brodin, Présences Contemporaines. Debresse, Paris, 1954. p. 16
42. Albert Gaudin, "La Poésie de Jacques Prévert," FR XX, May, 1947. p. 423-438.

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